



Your Turn
Pablo Matta
Guest columnist

El Paso needs a hand up, not a hand out

The traditional approach to addressing poverty has always felt paternalistic: give people resources and then tell them what they should or can do with said resources. But what would happen if a new approach was utilized? What about a concept that simply gave resources to families and allowed them to choose the solutions that will help them find financial freedom?

Six months ago, EPISO/Border Interfaith leaders began reaching out to the most rural parts of our community to deliver support to families negatively impacted by COVID-19.

It was through our partnership with El Paso County and UpTogether, that we were able to create the COVID-19 Emergency Relief Fund, which put immediate financial resources in the hands of thousands of families.

Thanks to the philanthropic vision of the Woody and Gayle Hunt Family Foundation, and their \$500,000 commitment to fight poverty in the Borderplex region, we were able to distribute more than \$500 to 1,000 families.

Through this outreach, we have learned and recognized that connections and relationship building is critical to building a path up towards economic prosperity. And that families know best.

That is why we are excited to announce another round of funding - this time, in larger investments - \$1,000 up front. It's money they can use however they choose, and they don't need to pay it back. This will allow families in our rural communities to invest resources in high-impact areas that are meaningful to them.

The UpTogether model proves that through financial support paired with a network of families with similar economic goals, disrupting the traditional approach to poverty reduction is possible. Distributing a check, and never hearing from a family again is not the way to build families up. Building trust with families is the first step.

We know the needs of families change from month to month, and that investing in their solutions is the way out of poverty. So we are working with specific families - those who have applied and received initial support - to go deeper.

The timing of this second round of funding is crucial. It has been more than a year since the global pandemic started, and while El Paso County's vaccination rate is higher than the national average (at approximately 70%), the impacts of the pandemic still linger: from housing to job and income security. We have seen firsthand multiple generations living in one house - seniors and children living together. We have seen households with only one income to support the family.

When families are living paycheck to paycheck, getting sick, or being forced to stay home from work can have a drastic impact on home life.

These are the families that we need to ensure have financial and community support as the pandemic continues. These families are looking for a hand up, not a hand out.

We need to empower them with the tools and resources to connect with each other and build an ecosystem of support - both financially and through ongoing opportunities.

This strength-based approach is how the UpTogether model works, and continues to strengthen communities. For more than 20 years, UpTogether has invested \$135M+ impacting more than 200,000 individuals.

EPISO/BI, UpTogether and the County of El Paso will continue working with the initial families from the first round of funding. By staying connected to these individuals, we will provide additional resources and investments. We will chart a new path forward for how we tackle poverty in our border region, and continue to follow their journey up, together.

Fr. Pablo Matta is co-chair of EPISO/Border Interfaith.